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NOV 29 1935
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HOUSEKEEPERS' CHAT

Friday, November 29, 1935

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Subject: "SEASONING HERBS FOR INDOOR GROWING." Information from the Bureau of Plant Industry, United States Department of Agriculture.

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Back in the days of our great-grandmothers, most good housewives grew their own herbs for seasoning. In summer they had a little herb-garden right in the dooryard, just a step from the kitchen. In winter, they grew their seasoning plants on a sunny window sill. So they had fresh flavors all year round at practically no cost. Those old-fashioned housewives were wise in herb lore. They knew which fragrant leaf would make a stew taste different and twice as good, and which would make a delicious savory stuffing for meat or fish or fowl. They knew how to add a bit of garden flavor to a creamed dish and how to make an omelet seem unusual just by its seasoning. They understood how best to use heat to draw out the oils in leaves and seeds that give the special flavor.

Well, any one of us can take a tip from our grandmothers and grow our own seasonings in winter -- so that we have them fresh and full of flavor instead of dried. Some of these herb plants are very hardy and will thrive on the window sill even when the snow is blowing against the pane.

I suppose there are people who think that all seasoning except perhaps salt and pepper is a mere frill with no place in an economy diet. But wiser cooks know that the less money they have to spend on food, the more they have to guard against monotony in using the same foods over and over again. And that's where your own home-grown seasoning helps out. Different seasonings can make everyday dishes look and taste different -- a help both to appetites and spirits on the dark, gloomy winter days.

Let's consider a few practical points about planting and caring for your indoor herb garden. First, what to grow it in. Well, the plants with deep roots you can raise in flower pots. The smaller plants and bulbs will even thrive in shallow pans. Or, you can grow several different kinds of herbs in a wooden or metal window box set on a shelf under the window where it will catch all possible light and sun -- a box six or eight inches deep and perhaps six to ten inches wide. A light galvanized tray underneath will protect the shelf. You can paint the box and tray to harmonize with the color scheme in your room. Now, proper drainage is most important for any indoor garden. So have a layer of broken stones about an inch thick over the bottom of the box and have one or two holes cut in the bottom to allow any surplus water to drain out. Use the same plan for flower pots. Have the pot at least six inches in diameter and put a few small stones in the bottom to keep the drainage hole from clogging. Set each pot in a saucer but never let water stand in the saucer.

Now about feeding your herbs. They need good rich soil, sunshine, regular watering, and cool, moist air. Garden experts advise filling your box or pot with a mixture like this: 1 part sand, 1 part manure, 2 to 3 parts good garden loam, and maybe a very little bone meal. Mix the soil well and put it through a coarse screen to get out all lumps before you pack it in the box. Then remember that no matter how good the soil, your herbs are going to need all the winter sun they can get.

As for water, be temperate about the amount you give your garden to drink. See that the soil is moist all the way through but never soaked. Water your garden twice a week -- every day, if the earth seems to be drying out. And remember, too, that though these plants won't stand a freezing temperature, they'll do best in cool moist air away from gas that escapes from your kitchen stove or the hot dry blast from your furnace.

Now about the herbs themselves. In many parts of the country Jack Frost has already been about and nipped any of these old-time herbs that you may have in your garden outdoors, so you can't plan on bringing them in. In this case, grow your herb garden from seeds and bulbs.

I think parsley deserves the place of honor at the head of your garden list. Its bright, green, curly leaves look as pretty on a window sill as any houseplant. And that green color isn't all looks either -- it means that the parsley leaves contain iron and vitamins, like all rich green leaves. Of course, you know how useful parsley is, not only as a garnish but as a seasoning for meat and soup, chopped in white sauce or in the melted butter you put over vegetables, in stews and salads and so on. The dwarf or curled parsley is good for indoor growing because it is compact -- doesn't take up much room. Fortunately, parsley thrives on moderate cutting. Since parsley seed is slow to germinate, get fresh seed and soak it 24 hours in tepid water before you plant it.

An old-time favorite for flavoring is sweet marjoram. The fragrant leaves are delicious fresh but lose their taste on drying. So you see, here's a seasoning that you need to keep growing in your home all winter. Marjoram is good in meat pie and stuffing, is extra good in soup, and the fresh tender leaves chopped with chive sprouts makes a French sauce out of plain white sauce.

Then, you can grow basil with a flavor much like cloves. Tender young basil leaves are delicious for flavoring tomato sauce and meat dishes of different kinds. They're also good chopped and sprinkled over an omelet.

Another useful plant for indoor gardens is the good old onion. Lots of people don't appreciate what a delicious taste a few chopped onion shoots can give winter salads or creamed dishes, yes, or soups, stews, meat loaf, stuffing, or hash. When you cut the shoots close to the soil, they'll sprout again. Or, if onion is too strong for you, how about those mild cousins of the onion and garlic -- chives? They'll sprout again, too, after cutting. Better plan on a few little chive bulbs in your garden.

Some people grow cress indoors, too, and that hardy favorite -- mint. Both these plants take rich soil and lots of moisture. Cress will add taste and good looks to any salad. You can turn your apple jelly into mint jelly just by dropping a few fresh mint sprigs in it. You can also use fresh mint in meat stuffing, especially for lamb; in sauces, desserts, fruit cocktails and -- but why tell any wise housewife how to make the most of her mint plants in these days?

Well, there's quite a collection already for your indoor herb garden -- parsley, onion, chives, sweet marjoram, basil, cress, and mint.

